



# FIELD EXPERIENCE: A KEY INGREDIENT TO APPLIED LEARNING AND EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

Since its creation in 1967, George Brown College has evolved considerably in assuming its current role of leader in applied education. Throughout its long history George Brown College has maintained its commitment to the provision of high quality professionally relevant classroom education with complimentary field experiences. It is this combination of the theory to practice paradigm that has given students a much-needed competitive edge in today's employment marketplace.

**KEY WORDS:** Field education, Classroom, Curriculum, Skillset, Employer needs.

## INTRODUCTION:

The College has gained a reputation in balancing theory with practice. Theory is easily attributed to the time spent in the classroom. The classroom is a place where students and professors learn from with and about one another while digesting the key relevant theoretical material. One very important aspect of the classroom dynamic is the relationship between the student and professor in establishing a rapport of trust and the dissemination of key concepts. As an adjunct to this learning dynamic is the experiential gems that the professor parlays to the student through story telling and personal accounts of what the workplace is like and what the workplace expects of its new graduate recruits.

Field education is a general term used in this project to describe a specific form of applied learning that occurs in the actual work setting. While field courses by definition provide students with the opportunity to be actively engaged in applying their knowledge and skill in the actual work setting, the primary purpose of a field course varies depending on the program area context and may include any or all of the following opportunities. Ross and Guescini (2019) researched in concert with the development of its 2020 strategy (GBC 2010), an intensive research and analysis of work integrated learning education from 2005 to 2010 and found the following results as actionable results of the experience:

- practice and develop discipline specific knowledge and skill
  - develop job search skills
  - develop confidence in the workplace
  - develop potential employment opportunities after graduation
- 1) Field education provides the student with the opportunity to: (Ross, Dykeman 2010)
    - formally integrate academic studies with field experience
    - learn both discipline specific and essential employability skills, and general education outcomes
    - develop skills, knowledge and attitudes pertinent to functioning in the role in the field
    - test skills and expand knowledge
  - 2) The field education curriculum is structured to:
    - match learning outcomes of the curriculum with the learning opportunities and resources available in the field placement.
    - extend over the length of a semester or block learning experience
  - 3) Field education curriculum reflects a collaborative partnership of student, college and industry:
    - learning outcomes are identified
    - student progress in meeting the outcomes is monitored by the college

- staff
- performance in the field is supervised and assessed by the staff in the field setting

## Type of Exemplars:

The implementation of the best practices for field education at George Brown may increase the number of employers/agencies choosing to place George Brown students over other college students. The successful development of quality field placement opportunities involves personalizing the process and investing human resources in developing and maintaining effective relationships with field placement staff. Some divisions clearly identified that the reliance on phone/email contact and follow-up alone does not result in the successful development and maintenance of quality learning opportunities for students. Success is based on program staff "literally knocking on doors", seizing opportunities, recruiting/building alumni support, and working with potential employers to create new learning opportunities for students.

A summary of the best practice guidelines reflected in George Brown field programs that emerged from the analysis of data are listed below: Price (1993) Ross (2021).

- 1) Structure of field education:
  - Clearly written course outlines with specific learning objectives
  - Expectations of student, faculty/staff and employer roles in field courses are clearly identified
  - Guaranteed authentic field placement for all eligible students
  - Field courses are funded through fulltime tuition funding
- 2) Process of field education:
  - Field courses are student versus employer driven
  - Staff/faculty involved in course development
  - Faculty supported in developing and maintaining relationships with professional/industry associations
  - Criteria established for the selection of field placement sites
  - Personalized approach to obtaining student placements - Partnership model used in obtaining and creating opportunities for student placements Students are supported and 'ready' to enter the field
  - Structured process used for the mechanics of placing students: select, match and assign students to placements; consistent student placement; and effective website/software support
  - Support provided to employers supervising student – prior to and during student placement (e.g., manual, training, placement breakdown protocol)
  - Faculty involved in supervising/monitoring students in the work setting

## 3) Outcome of field education:

- Support provided for ongoing monitoring of effectiveness of field placement and student learning experience: student, faculty/staff, employer/agency. (Ross and Guescini 2019).

**Case Example:**

In consultation with a number of graduates, using focus group methodology it was found that the deciding factor for their enrollment in a College program was the field experiences offered.

The work integrated learning (WIL) office at George Brown College mantra is the crucial linkage of students to industry. In 2020, George Brown College, alongside a consortium of other Ontario colleges were successful in obtaining a grant called the Drive Ability program. The Drive Ability program was funded by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD) and its goal was to address skilled labour needs of the automotive and advanced manufacturing employers in Ontario. Employers that were eligible to participate in the fund, were awarded a cash incentive after hiring students for placement opportunities (Ross 2021).

George Brown College was successful in securing numerous placements with a wide range of employers. Employers were eligible to hire specialists from various programs like Human Resources, Marketing, CNC Machining, Engineering, Computer Programming and Tool and Die. This fund was created to help support industry partners, as well as our students. The Drive Ability program seamlessly connected students to industry partners. This overall experience gave students a real-life employment opportunity and a much deeper appreciation for the automotive industry.

Field experience is one of the great advantages of attending a College over a University for post-secondary education. This experience described above is a win-win opportunity that will help the Canadian automotive industry retool its human resource recruitment for future employees.

**CONCLUSION:**

Over the years educators have learnt that the educational journey of a student is very complex. If we were to break this journey into component parts of exposure to mastery one would have to say that the process is multifactorial. Many years ago, the great Chinese philosopher of life, Confucius (551BC-479BC) spoke to how everything has a place and a purpose. In terms of education, he was quoted as saying "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand. Years later Xunzi a disciple of Confucius refined the quote by saying "Not hearing is not as good as hearing, hearing is not as good as seeing, seeing is not as good as knowing, knowing is not as good as acting; true learning continues until it is put into action." Keeping these quotes in mind, today's educational experience is a composite of each of these factors. Coupling didactic education with a meaningful field experience is key to ensuring the next generation of students are ready to hit the road running in their respective fields of choice. The next phase of the educational journey will do the addition of new skillsets as the job and work changes. This will be the role of upskilling and microcredentials. If we spend time laying down a strong foundation in the students' formative years, this upskilling will be easy to achieve. With this in mind we will truly understand the meaning of developing lifelong learners.

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